

Autonomy for universities doesn't mean cutting State funds

The government should categorically affirm that its readiness to grant graded autonomy doesn't mean it will abdicate its financial responsibility towards universities

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The debate on the autonomy of Indian universities began soon after Prakash Javadekar, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, made an announcement granting autonomy to a group of 60 higher education institutions. This selection was done by the University Grants Commission (UGC) on the basis of the ratings given by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC).

It is important to recognise that Indian universities are facing a number of challenges. While the most obvious of these are with relation to the lack of adequate research and knowledge creation in universities, there are other serious challenges relating to recruitment of outstanding faculty as inspiring teachers, the pursuit of research, availability of resources, governance challenges, infrastructure crises and the growing discontent among the student community.

Governments — both in the states and the Centre — have attempted to address these challenges over the years through policy reforms and institutional initiatives led by regulatory bodies. However, it is only fair to say that the past reforms have not had a

demonstrable impact on the state of Indian universities. The UGC's decision to grant greater autonomy to a select group of higher education institutions reflects a larger policy initiative that the current government is pursuing. As a first step, leading institutions of management, the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), were provided autonomy in their functioning. The selection of the institutes of eminence as a part of an effort to build world class universities is another policy that the government is pursuing.

At the heart of public policy reforms in higher education are the universities. Universities need autonomy to function effectively. Governments both in the states and the Centre must recognise that it is in their best interests to empower universities to function in an autonomous manner. Institutional dynamism, research excellence and the social impact of universities are best achieved when they are left to the universities alone. But autonomy cannot be confused with funding, which should to be made available for their growth. The government should categorically affirm that its readiness to grant graded autonomy doesn't mean it will abdicate its financial responsibility towards universities.

India's aspirations to build a world class higher education system are understandable. The historical leadership that the Indian subcontinent provided centuries ago through the Nalanda and Takshashila institutions of learning needs to be revived. The oldest existing, and continually operating, educational institution in the world is the University of Karueein, founded in 859 AD in Fez, Morocco. The University of Bologna, Italy, the oldest in Europe, was founded in 1088. But the Indian imagination for higher education predates both these initiatives dating back to the 5th century.

It is an opportune moment for us in India to recall the vision of university autonomy from The Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education passed in Lima, Peru, on September 10, 1988. Thirty years ago, it was affirmed that autonomy means: "The independence of institutions of higher education from the State and all other forces of society to make decisions regarding its internal government, finance, administration, and to establish its policies of education, research, extension work, and other related activities."

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The views expressed are personal